Constantine, Rome, and the Christians

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Introduction

The relations between the emperor and various loyalty groups in the empire occupy a central place in accounts of the change in religious policy under Constantine.[1] Particularly important are the phases after civil wars in which large territories were seized and new relations between ruler and ruled had to be established and negotiated, that is, after the caesuras of 312, 316–317, and 324. This chapter is dedicated to the years after 312 and the relations between the emperor and the newly conquered imperial capital. This period is special insofar as in these years the emperor not only had to reconstitute his relations with various population groups in Rome but also, at the same time, had to formulate a claim to sole rule that could be justified to the whole empire by possession of the capital. The capture of Rome by Constantine led to new forms of exaggerated self-representation that targeted partly the city of Rome and partly the empire, and thereby contributed to changes in the relationship of the emperor to the conventional (pagan, Roman, and civic) and to the Christian religions.

Most striking is the connection between the capture of Rome and the “conversion” of Constantine as formulated in the well-known narrative of the late pagan Zosimus. Christianity and adherence to old Roman values there appear to be incompatible elements: Constantine’s refusal to perform the traditional rituals allegedly led to a confrontation with the senate and people of Rome in 326, and the founding of Constantinople will have been directed against Rome.[2] Constantine, as a Christian, thus failed to satisfy the civic traditions of Rome and the population that clung to them. One thing that may be true in this variously distorted picture is that there indeed was a connection between the religious revolution introduced in 312 and the significance that the capture of the capital occupied in Constantine’s self-representation. Any attempt to describe this connection is, however, hampered by a fragmentary and contradictory source basis.

Footnotes

1

On the conversion of Constantine, see first of all the comprehensive work of Girardet 2006. Girardet depicts a journey “vom Polytheismus über einen vagen philosophischen Henotheismus zum christlichen Monotheismus” (p. 155), but stresses above all the break in 311–312; see also Girardet 2010. A history of the conversion of Constantine that focuses less on the emperor than on the parts of the empire with which he communicated is offered by Van Dam 2007.

2

For an interpretation of the conversion of Constantine in connection with the visit to Rome in 326, see Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.29; cf. Paschoud 2000. The history of the break with Rome and the commitment to Christianity has left unclear traces in the Byzantine tradition; cf. Bleckmann 1995, 60–61. On the other traditions concerning the visit to Rome, see also Wiemer 1994.

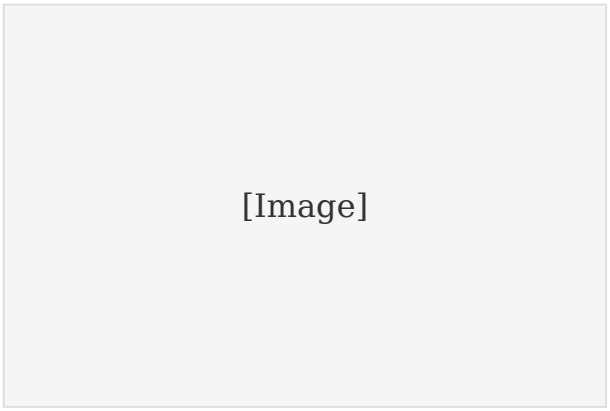
Constantine’s Building Policy after the Victory over Maxentius

Rome propaganda and Rome ideology were demonstrably still unimportant in the first years of Constantine’s reign. From 312, by contrast, they naturally assumed the greatest significance after Constantine had prevailed over Maxentius in an unprecedented victory in battle before the gates of Rome and had entered the city in a ceremonial *adventus*. The traditional formulas of a supposedly Republican ethos were revived in the interpretation of the capture of Rome: Constantine was represented as the restorer of Roman liberty, and his defeated opponent Maxentius as a tyrant.[3]

At the same time, much was taken over from Maxentius with little difficulty. In his propaganda and self-representation, Maxentius, the “false Romulus,”[4] had consistently pressed his advantage in that he was the only ruler at the time who resided in Rome; he presented himself as a kind of new founder and divine hero, as *conservator urbis suae*.[5] Constantine could now play all these cards to stress his

own special relationship with Rome to the exclusion of the other Tetrarchs. The great building projects from the era of Maxentius already under way or complete were normally not destroyed[6] but were reinterpreted in a Constantinian sense (Figure 15.1). The so-called Basilica of Maxentius on the Forum, perhaps intended as an audience chamber, received a colossal statue in its western apse (initially the only one),[7] which showed not Maxentius, but Constantine.[8] The large double temple for Rome and Venus, the “Temple of the City” closely related to the basilica, was dedicated to the “Merits of Flavius.”[9] The building projects on the Palatine, the substructure of the Circus Maximus, and the new baths complex on the Quirinal were likewise continued by Constantine.[10] It cannot be excluded that even the triumphal arch was originally part of the comprehensive building program planned for Maxentius and only later was unveiled as a monument to Constantine’s victory and the liberation of the City of Rome by the arrangement of the *spolia* and the incorporation of appropriate reliefs.

Map of the city of Rome in the age of Constantine.



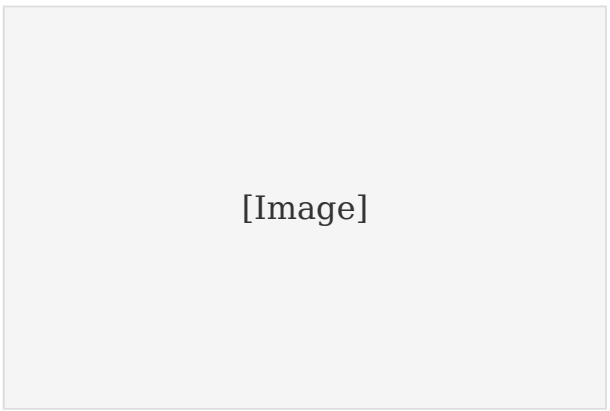


Figure 15.1

Meager reports and meager remains presumably make it impossible to draw a complete picture of the work of transformation that Constantine undertook after his victory over Maxentius. Unknown, for example, is the location of the approximately fifty-meter-long Trajanic relief, with its echoes of Hellenistic art, before it was built into the Arch of Constantine.[11] This alone proves how thin the tradition and how uncertain the assessment of Constantine's building program are, especially his imitation of the *optimus princeps*, which, as is well known, even led to a change in the contemporary imperial hairstyle.[12] New archaeological finds suggest that the Forum of Trajan in the center of the city may have been transformed by Constantine.[13] Association with Trajan enabled Constantine to connect the ideology of the *optimus princeps* to the theme of military strength accepted by the senate and people. The emperor and his army were honored not only by the depiction of military scenes but also by the display of army standards in the city (e.g., on statues of Constantine).[14]

Even if the extent and character of Constantinian renovations cannot ultimately be appreciated completely or his stylization as a new Trajan be assessed with precision, it is nonetheless certain that Constantine erected no completely new buildings of his own—excepting the special case of the arch—in the urban center. This fact has been interpreted as evidence that Constantine's Christian faith could not be manifested in building projects in the center of Rome out of respect for the senate, a majority of which was pagan.[15] The true religious sympathies of Constantine could find expression only on the periphery of Rome, that is, in the basilicas and churches on the edges of the city and on property owned by the emperor (Figure 15.1). This dichotomy of center and periphery, public and private, is disputable. Constantine hardly needed to disguise his true religious convictions, if one considers the real distribution of power, and there was in fact no lack of provocation even in the center of the city with the open and ostentatious depiction of a victory in a civil war.[16]

Instead of presuming a strict dichotomy of (less Constantinian) center and (more explicitly Constantinian) periphery, one should, with Steffen Diefenbach, conceive of different communicative spaces with different themes of imperial self-presentation.[17] In the urban center, the traditional pseudo-Republican ideology of the Principate predominated in the depiction of Constantine, and the liberation of the city from the tyranny of Maxentius was celebrated. It complemented this ideology of liberation that several of the building projects of Maxentius that were financed and continued by Constantine were explicitly presented as dedications of the senate.[18] Constantine thus followed the practice of the high Principate and

especially Trajan, who did not honor himself in the building inscription of the Column of Trajan but rather allowed the senate and people of Rome to assume the role of honorands. In contrast, the dynastic idea could be expressed in some of the new, magnificent constructions on the outskirts of the city; for example, in the preparation of imperial crypts in the mausoleums of the burial churches, reference was perhaps made to the Christian cult of the martyrs.

Both communicative spaces, periphery and center, were given a certain uniformity in that the new Christian complexes—certainly, the newly built Lateran church on the site of the destroyed camp of the *equites singulares*—stressed the military strength of Constantine as vehemently as the buildings in the center and were perhaps "Trajanically" inspired in the same way as in the center. In distinguishing communicative spaces, one must always presume that the facets of Constantine's self-presentation in the urban center represent him no less than those on the periphery. The same had been true of Maxentius: the juxtaposition of the monuments in the center of the city and the extra-urban complex on the Via Appia must have strongly shaped the representation of his rule. The latter site, which combined a mausoleum and an imperial villa with hippodrome, constituted a strong dynastic center inspired by the Tetrarchic palace tradition.[19] The bipolar staging of the imperial presence sketched here for Rome would be repeated later in Constantinople:[20] there one center consisting of a forum and palace was juxtaposed to another consisting of the Church of the Apostles and mausoleum. It is perhaps only an accident of the archaeological records that the bipolar structure of Maxentius' building program seems to exhibit far sharper contours than Constantine's.

Footnotes

3

Grünewald 1990, 64–71, on the coining of the concept of tyrant in Constantinian representation; Wienand 2012, 239–246, on the vilification of Maxentius in Constantinian representation.

5

Cullhed 1994; Oenbrink 2006; Ziemssen 2007. In 2006, items unearthed near the Palatine Hill (3 lances, 4 javelins, 3 orbs, a scepter, and a standard base) have

been identified (controversially) as the imperial insignia of Maxentius; cf. Panella 2011. I remain skeptical, however.

6

On the destruction of the camps and other installations of Maxentius' military support, that is, the praetorians and the *equites singulares*, cf. Hekster 1999, 740–743. Maxentius potentially had planned an extensive expansion of the Forum complex next to the basilica, which was, however, not carried out by Constantine; cf. the hypotheses of Döring-Williams 2004.

7

The basilica was thus focused on a sole apse also under Constantine, which raises the importance of the statue erected there. A second apse was added in the time of Honorius; see Cullhed 1994, 51. The focus on the west apse was perhaps increased even more because the center axis was further emphasized by the construction of a narthex; on this, see Döring-Williams 2004.

8

Whether the famous colossal statue of Constantine was a reworked statue of Maxentius is disputed; cf. Mayer 2002, 199, with n. 986. That would imply that the statue, presumably originally of Hadrian, had been first prepared for Maxentius, but then reworked for Constantine. On the dating to the time of Hadrian, cf. Evers 1991.

9

Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.26: *Adhuc cuncta opera, quae magnifice construxerat, urbis fanum atque basilicam Flavii meritis patres sacravere*.

10

Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.27: *A quo etiam post Circus maximus excultus mirifice atque ad*

lavandum institutum opus ceteris haud multo dispar.

13

Cf. especially the colossal head of Constantine, which was probably taken from the Forum of Trajan, as an indication of the “Aneignung des ganzen Forums durch Constantin nach seinem Sieg über Maxentius”: Strobel 2010, 309. For a dating of the head late in Constantine’s reign, see Hannestad 2007, CII.

14

The standards of the legions and the praetorian guard, which decorated the Forum of Trajan, were perhaps updated—at least with respect to the dissolved praetorian guard. On the presumed altering of the inscriptions on the standard bases, see Strobel 2010, 309 n. 13. The *spqr optimo principi*-coins combining the legend and the depiction of standards are an exact copy of their Trajanic model. The three standards displayed there, however, are adapted to the contemporary *vexilla* types; cf. R.-Alföldi 1963, 58.

16

That is in the imagery on the Arch of Constantine. On the contemporary reliefs, see Raeck 1998; on the civil-war theme under Constantine, see Wienand’s contribution in this volume.

18

Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 40.26.

20

On this, see Lenski’s contribution to this volume.

Rome and Her Divine Savior Constantine

If the traditional center promoted above all communication between the emperor and the other institutions of the Roman state, that is, the senate and *populus Romanus*, this did not occur, as one might expect, in respectful quasi-Republican forms. Constantine rather followed the precedent of Trajan, who—in this respect much the successor of Domitian—inundated the city center in a celebration of his victorious nature. The example of the Tetrarchs was even stronger: they had expressed their new monarchic self-understanding in the midst of Rome by erecting the so-called Five-Column Monument on the most important site in the Forum and by imposing a new court ceremonial that forced even the senate to perform *adoratio*. Constantine's self-representation in the urban center accordingly reflected formulas that stemmed from the usual interpretation of the role of the emperor and his relationship to the supernatural-divine sphere. Despite a brief renaissance of imperial titulature from the high empire, relations with the senate and people made it crystal clear that the emperor was not behaving as the quasi-magistrate of the Roman Republic.[21] On the contrary, Rome appeared merely as the object of deliverance by a divinely inspired emperor.

Indications of this interpretation can already be seen on the Arch of Constantine, which, as suggested, unusually celebrated victory over an opponent in a civil war (Figure 15.2). Such stylization, which permitted the *liberator urbis* and *fundator quietis* to appear as a salvation-bringing hero, in fact contradicted the quasi-Republican veneer cast over the victory.[22] In the *oratio* scene on the contemporary reliefs prepared for the arch, Constantine alone is depicted frontally and in slightly larger-than-life size. On the reused Hadrianic tondi, his superhuman nature is expressed by a nimbus.[23] The interpretation proposed by F. Kolb, that the inscription emphasizes not only Constantine's *magnitudo mentis* but probably also his *divinitas*, is supported by the fact that similar passages stressing Constantine's *divinitas* may be found in the panegyrics.[24] Kolb also observes that the genitives in the chiastic construction *instinctu divinitatis* and *mentis magnitudine* must refer to the same person.[25]

The Arch of Constantine, north face.

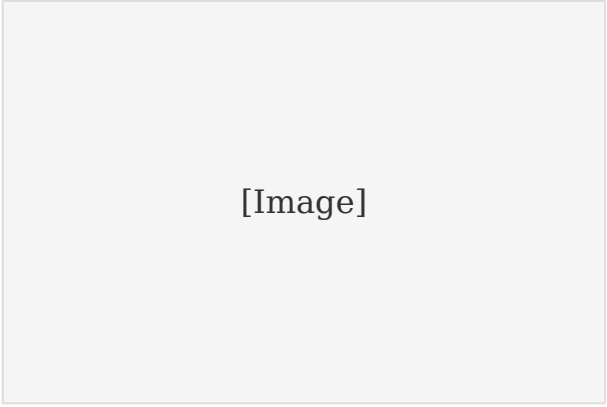


Figure 15.2

Even if one ignores the case of the inscription on the Arch of Constantine, adheres to the traditional interpretation, or advances new alternative interpretations,[26] other evidence shows how Constantine's divine qualities were evoked in the cityscape. This includes, in particular, the colossal, seated statue of Constantine from the basilica, which appears in godlike semi-nudity with his vision directed upward in the visionary distance (Figure 15.3).[27] The statement of the anonymous panegyrist of 313 that the senate had the statue of a god erected might refer to this statue or a very similar one: the following passages show that it must have been a statue that celebrated the *divinitas* of Constantine, as the honorary shield and wreath, allegedly conferred by Italy, celebrated respectively his *virtus* and *pietas*.[28] Finally, the monument described by Eusebius, which may or may not be identical with the famous statue,[29] could also have stressed the divine qualities of this imperial savior. The inscription on the monument is interpreted by Eusebius in a Christian sense as the proclamation of the new symbol of salvation and is probably authentic only in part; it recalls, though, the special relationship advertised on the arch: between Constantine as divinely inspired savior and the senate and people of Rome as those he has delivered. Eusebius' report, if not itself wholly authentic, still appears to be constructed from authentic elements of contemporary propaganda: "By this saving sign, by the true proof of valor have I saved and liberated your city from the yoke of tyranny. Moreover, after their liberation, I have restored the senate and people of Rome to their former state of glory and prestige."[30] The exceptional qualities of Constantine as god and savior of Rome are evoked, last, by Aurelius Victor, who contrasts the mild reign of Constantine in the years 313–316 with the brutality of Licinius: *Hinc pro conditore seu deo habitus*.[31]

Fragment of the colossal statue of Constantine.

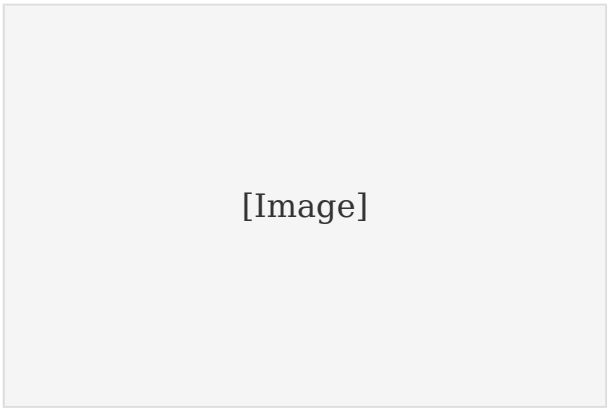


Figure 15.3

If Constantine presented himself in 312 and later even within the traditional center of Rome as possessed of extraordinary divine qualities, this may be explained by the fact that emperors since the Tetrarchy, as the agents of the supernatural and the divine, had required quasi-religious worship on an unprecedented scale. What was new in 312, though, was that this divine power, as the agent of which Constantine directed the cosmos,[32] had nothing to do with the Tetrarchic pantheon of patron deities. Of course, elements of traditional pagan religiosity are not wanting in the images on the Arch of Constantine. Next to the hunting scenes in the Hadrianic tondi, scenes of sacrifice are depicted in which the reworking of the heads displays Constantine offering sacrifice for all to see.[33] A sacrifice scene also appears in the attic story on the high reliefs reused from the time of Marcus Aurelius or Commodus. These reliefs must also have given the contemporary observer the impression that Constantine has portrayed himself in the act of sacrifice. Also displayed, both on the reused reliefs and on the relief for the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, are the goddess Roma, the goddess Victoria, and the god Mars.[34] At least on the arch, then, the existence of this world of gods was not ignored. Constantine let clear ties to old Roman tradition be perceived on a central monument in Rome, on which he himself appears sacrificing to minor deities.

It is nonetheless striking that this notional submission to traditional polytheism is heavily qualified. Ritual acts for the old chief god of Rome, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, who stood on an entirely different level in the divine hierarchy from Silvanus, Roma, or even Mars, are completely absent in the images on the arch. Only one image depicts sacrificial animals and no image sacrifice on the Capitol

itself. One relief in the group, which is usually attributed to the attic story, was left unused, though it certainly was available, because it showed a sacrifice to Jupiter Capitolinus.[35] In this respect, as has been demonstrated in the scholarly literature, there is a close parallel between the Arch of Constantine and the panegyric of 313, in which an allusion to a sacrifice to Jupiter Optimus Maximus is likewise missing.

The omission of a sacrifice to Jupiter is not in itself a compelling confession of Christian faith. Pagan elements, as said earlier, are also encountered on the Arch of Constantine. The movement toward Christianity was in the first instance a consequence of the fact that Constantine could show no reverence to Jupiter as the chief god of the Tetrarchic religion, from which he had distanced himself already after his controversial accession.[36] A universal god took the place of Jupiter, a god who could be identified as the Christian god by the Christians and who certainly stood above the conventionally recognized pantheon. Most probably, the newly proclaimed patron deity that mirrored Constantine's imperial ambitions was initially *Sol Invictus*, who was conceived as a universal deity that could not be represented iconographically[37] and thus could easily be identified with the *summus deus*. His counterpart in the Greco-Roman pantheon, Sol/Apollo, was a kind of subordinate deity, whose iconography gave expression above all to the cosmic dimensions of Constantine's act of deliverance. For this reason, the Constantinian medallions of the gods of the sun and moon frame the triumphal arch on both sides as symbols of *aeternitas*.[38]

The origins of this novel conception of a patron deity should be sought in Gaul, as Constantine prepared for the confrontation with his Tetrarchic colleagues, that is, from 310. The uniqueness of the new universal god could be stressed much more emphatically after 312, when it corresponded to the position that Constantine claimed as the highest-ranking emperor. He was now striving to establish his singularity after his victory over Maxentius and the liberation of the capital of the empire; he would claim this status even more stridently with the assumption of the title *maximus*.[39]

The magnanimity and divine quality of Constantine stressed in his Rome propaganda after 312 are explained by the contention that Constantine stood in direct contact with this supreme deity, which was known to him alone and stood above all the specific gods of the pantheon. The exaltation of the emperor in sacred, cosmic terms had already been central to the ideology of the Tetrarchy. Maxentius had adopted elements of the ruling ideology of the Tetrarchs, but had modified them to suit his own situation; he sought to legitimize not a collegiate system of rule but only his own isolated position through new variants that justified

his imperial mission. In doing so, he set himself on par with the goddess Roma in his self-representation,[40] and he conceptualized the city of Rome as *urbs sua*, as the object of imperial care.[41] Connected to this self-aggrandizement was a certain distance from Jupiter Capitolinus and identification as a new Mars. Maxentius' tendencies to triumphal self-aggrandizement appear to have been strengthened by his victory and triumph over his rival in Africa, Domitius Alexander.[42] The victory of Constantine in turn led to even greater emphasis on a special relationship to the supreme patron deity, as he incorporated in his propaganda formulas that had been significant under Maxentius. Constantine had himself praised as a savior, who now stood before Rome larger than life and whose patron deity could no longer be accommodated in the traditional pantheon by any means. This new conception of a heroic imperial savior, easily recognizable right in the traditional center of the city, and his supreme, inconceivable patron deity are probably reason enough to explain why Constantine did not erect any sacred structures of his own in the center of Rome.

Footnotes

21

On the gold coins with the legend PM TRIB P COS III PP PROCOS, see R.-Alföldi 1963, 182 no. 301. The coin is a revival of a type minted already by Maximian in 305.

22

On Constantine as *conditor*, that is, as *heros ktistes*, see n. 31 below. Constantine is celebrated by the Romans as *lytrotes* (liberator), *soter*, and *euergetes*; cf. Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.39.2.

25

On the usual ascription of *divinitas* and *mens* to different people, see, for example, Holloway 2004, 19: "inspiration from the divine and the might of his intelligence."

27

The Jupiter costume could be explained by the reuse of the seated statue of Hadrian.

28

Pan. lat. 12(9).25.4: *Merito igitur tibi, Constantine, et nuper senatus signum dei et paulo ante Italia scutum et coronam, cuncta aurea, dedicarunt, ut conscientiae debitum aliqua* ex parte *relevarent. Debetur enim et saepe debebitur et divinitati simulacrum et virtuti scutum et corona pietati.* For interpretation, see Nixon/Rodgers 1994, 331 n. 87; Curran 2000, 80 (referring to an unknown god). Contrast R.-Alföldi 1961, who retains the text (*signum dee*) and connects it to a statue of Victoria.

30

Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.40.2 (trans. Cameron/Hall 1999); Cf. Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 9.9.11. Instead of a *signum salutare*, Rufinus *Hist. eccl.* speaks of a *singulare signum*, which fits the deliverance ideology less well. But even the inscription cited by Eusebius raises uncertainty. It is unlikely that the emperor will have spoken about himself in the first person. Instead of “your city,” he must have said “his city”; cf. not only *urbs sua* in the propaganda of Maxentius but also the possessive pronoun for the senate in a letter of Constantine’s; see Millar 1992, 354.

31

Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 41.5. *Conditor* alludes to the deliverance of Rome and can be connected, for instance, with the characterization of Marius as the “third founder” of Rome.

32

On this conception, which is connected with the depiction of Tetrarchs enthroned on a globe in a relief from Thessalonike, see the solidus from Ticinum that shows Constantine with the symbols of the zodiac and the legend *rector totius orbis* (illustrated in Herrmann-Otto 2007, 199; the alleged references to the Sunday

legislation are not compelling in my opinion).

33

This is at least true of the sacrifice scenes for Silvanus and Diana; see Mayer 2002, 190. Because the sacrifice scenes with Constantine appear on the south side of the arch, they may have had a special significance; see Wallraff 2001, 129. On the scholarly debate over who appears in the other *tondi*, see Rohmann 1998. The choice of Apollo, Diana, Silvanus, and Hercules is not the result of the chance availability of the *spolia*. There may be a specific reference to the foundation myth of the city as it was understood in Late Antiquity, which again elaborated the theme of the close relationship between Constantine and Rome. On the significance of Diana and Apollo in the Secular Games, cf. Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.5.4–5. On the significance of Hercules in the story of the foundation of Rome, see *Origo gent. Rom.* 6–8. Silvanus is identified by the author of the *Origo gent. Rom.* 4.6, with Faunus, who founds the first settlement of Rome on the Palatine.

34

Holloway 2004, 25 (the reliefs on the attic: Constantine accompanied by Mars and Dea Roma), 30 (the great Trajanic frieze with the depiction of Victoria and Roma), and 26 (depiction of Victoria and Dea Roma on the relief of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge). These images support the view of Lenski 2008, who presumes an *evocatio* of the goddess Roma from Maxentius to Constantine. Precisely this, though, would betray Constantine’s still clearly pagan religious thought at the time. Whether there is a connection to the report of Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.31.3 about a temple of Tyche of Rome in Constantinople remains open. The notice would give evidence that the acquisition of the goddess Roma, despite her lesser prominence in the later self-representation of Constantine, remained important, and it would explain peculiarities of the founding of Constantinople.

35

Mayer 2002, 201. This argument is not entirely convincing, since another relief with the suovetaurilia preparations was used in the attic zone of Constantine’s arch.

36

On the marginalization of Jupiter Capitolinus already under Maxentius and parallels with Constantine, see Fears 1981, 823; cf. also 824: “By their adherence to Sol and Mars, Constantine and Maxentius proclaimed their break with the Diocletianic political order.” Mars replaces Jupiter on many coins of Maxentius in his function as the highest god; see also Hekster 1999, 732.

37

On the sun god as supreme god (*Helios Megistos*), see Fauth 1995. On his aniconographic cult, see Grigg 1977.

38

On Luna and Sol on the arch, see Curran 2000, 89: The triumphant *adventus* in Rome becomes a cosmic event; cf. Wallraff 2001, 129: “Der Bogen erhält durch die beiden großen Medaillons mit Sol und Luna auf den Außenseiten eine kosmische Rahmung.” Girardet 2010, 85, believes that the depiction of the sun god could be interpreted by Christians as *sol iustitiae*. Because of the corresponding depiction of the moon goddess, a different solution seems preferable to me. The sun and moon would be acceptable to Christians as symbols of eternity. The sun and moon accordingly appear on Christian sarcophagi as familiar formulas for cosmic time.

39

Grünewald 1990, 86–92, with corrections in Wienand 2012, 222–223 n. 72. The first coin to mention the title is the famous gold medallion produced in ad 313 in Ticinum (RIC 6 Ticinum 111); the most prominent (but not the first) epigraphic attestation is the inscription on the triumphal arch in Rome. *Maximus* seems to have been part of the standard imperial titulature from 312–313.

40

Ziemssen 2007, 45, and 48–51: the depiction of the transfer of the globe illustrates how the divine quality of *Roma aeterna auctrix augusti*, namely, *aeternitas*, passes

to Maxentius, who saves the city in return.

41

On the issues with the legend CONSERVATOR VRBIS SVAE, see Ziemssen 2007, 44–45: *conservator* is, as Ziemssen rightly emphasizes, to be interpreted here as “savior,” “deliverer”; cf. Hekster 1999, 744.

42

On the triumph of Maxentius over Domitius Alexander, see Zos. *Nea hist.* 2.14.3–4. His testimony is regarded by Diefenbach 2007, 127, with skepticism. Girardet 2006, 64 n. 92, sees in Zosimus’ testimony a reference to the procession to the Capitol.

Roman Ideological Reflexes in the Conversion Story in Eusebius’ *Vita Constantini*

In light of the considerations discussed above, the so-called conversion of Constantine must be explained as a complex event that involves the victory of Constantine over Maxentius, the self-aggrandizement of the emperor that accompanied it, and his distancing himself from the traditional cults. In Eusebius’ account of the vision, Constantine’s conversion to Christianity occurs well before his victory over Maxentius, and the Gallic context of this religious- political shift has been emphasized greatly in recent publications.[43] If one closely examines the vision narrative of Eusebius, though, it is indeed clear that the so-called vision dates before the campaign against Maxentius and is located in Gaul, but it is also clear that Constantine’s experience of the vision and conversion in this account is noticeably colored by the ideology of the city of Rome. Constantine, according to Eusebius, is preparing the attack on Maxentius on his own initiative, after the other Tetrarchs had failed. He sees himself obligated to liberate the city of Rome, because its subjugation practically upsets the world order: “He then perceived that the whole earthly element was like a great body, and next became aware that the head of the whole, the imperial city of the Roman empire, lay oppressed by bondage to a tyrant.”[44] Constantine seeks supernatural, effective support strictly

for the liberation of Rome from tyranny, a tyranny that stands in contradiction to the cosmic order of things. Even before the vision, he recognizes this support in the "god, who is beyond the universe"—in other words, in a super-cosmic *summus deus*, whom his father before him had worshipped. Counting on the coming success, Constantine contrasts the power of this supreme god with the powerlessness of the individual patron deities worshipped by the other Tetrarchs:

> He therefore considered what kind of god he should adopt to aid him, and, while he thought, a clear impression came to him, that of the many who had in the past aspired to government, those who had attached their personal hopes to many gods . . . met an unwelcome end, nor did any god stand at their side to protect them from divinely directed disaster; only his own father had taken the opposite course to theirs by condemning their error, while he himself had throughout his life honoured the God who transcends the universe, and had found him a saviour and guardian of his empire and a provider of everything good.[45]

The heroic deliverance of Rome and the help of the *summus deus*, the god who is beyond the universe, are thus all of a piece in Eusebius' report. Eusebius' comments leave no doubt that the *summus deus*, the god that Constantine had already known from his father, cannot have been the Christian god in a strict sense.

Eusebius' perspective, fixed on Rome as it is, can only be explained if he had followed an ultimately secular contemporary account. Its broad dissemination is apparent from the fact that the anonymous panegyric of 313 describes the deliverance of the city by Constantine, his distance from the other Tetrarchs, and his exclusive relationship with the all-powerful deity in the same way. Constantine is the first to take up the struggle against Maxentius, while the other members of the imperial college hesitate. Through his exclusive relationship to the supreme deity, Constantine senses that the time has come to liberate the city with his own hands: "What god, what majesty so immediate encouraged you . . . to perceive on your own . . . that the time had come to liberate the City? You must share some secret with that divine mind, Constantine, which has delegated care of us to lesser gods and deigns to reveal itself to you alone."[46] Remains of this narrative are also present in Praxagoras and in the fifty-ninth oration of Libanius, which both report that Constantine had to take action against Maxentius out of compassion for the

Romans.[47]

Not only the parallels between the panegyric of 313 and Eusebius' narrative of Constantine's exclusive mission in the name of the supreme deity indicate that Eusebius offers us an account that has been Christianized in the second instance. Eusebius' account of the oppression of Rome by the tyrant Maxentius reveals similar traces of a subsequent Christianization. The false Romulus and new Tarquin the Proud, Maxentius is transformed into an anti-Christian tyrant only by Christian sleight of hand. Maxentius rages not only against the wives of senators but also tries to "lay hand on Christian women," until he makes an attack on the Christian wife of the urban prefect: she proves to be a new Lucretia and kills herself.[48]

The story that Constantine liberated Rome on behalf of the supreme god was thus probably, in religious terms, a very vague account of the liberation of Rome. It was then transformed by Eusebius or his source into a depiction that still did not quite fit the essence of Christianity—that Constantine had received from the Christian god the rather patriotic mission of liberating Rome. This Christian modification of the panegyric version is apparently almost as old as the non-Christian original, dating to the period immediately after 312. Its essentials are recoverable already in the parts of the Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius written before 324.[49]

The contemporary Christianization of the basic narrative of the deliverance of Rome by Constantine in alliance with the *summus deus* seems to derive from Constantine's encountering a religiously diverse population in Rome, of which the Christian community was a conspicuous part. This community had been persecuted by Maximian Herculius only for a short time, whereas Maxentius had patronized the Christians and even—as Eusebius must admit[50]—at least initially presented himself to the Christians as a sympathizer. The Christians certainly constituted a group in Rome that commanded respect. This was due not only to their presumably large number of several ten-thousand adherents, but also above all to the high degree of organization within the Roman church.[51] If the early papal elections were conducted as popular elections, significant masses of people must have assembled to participate. This high degree of organization and mobilization explains a remark of Cyprian, namely, that Decius feared the election of a new pope in Rome more than the acclamation of a usurper.[52]

This large, urban community of Roman Christians would and could have come to terms with a victory of Maxentius over Constantine, but when Constantine prevailed, the Christian community hailed him together with the senate and

people. It was obvious to this community that the *summus deus* of Constantine, which stood above the single gods and the universe, could only be the Christian god. Constantine himself actively encouraged this interpretation in proclamations directed to the Christians; he had already met Christians and bishops in Gaul, but in Rome he encountered the impressive phenomenon of Christian multitudes for the first time.[53] Even if Constantine's devotion to the *summus deus* had nothing to do with Christian humility or with a conversion experience, but rather developed with a certain inevitability from his ever-more successful self-differentiation from the system of Tetrarchic patron deities and the general movement toward monotheism typical of the times,[54] the convergence and fusion of Constantine's supreme god and the Christian god was for Constantine self-evident. Yet this embrace of the Christian god could be decidedly problematic for some Christians. In his first contacts with the churches of Rome and Carthage, the supreme imperial worshipper of the *summus deus* promptly identified with the desires of the church against the Donatist minority.[55]

Footnotes

43

The influence and theological counsel of the Gallic bishops in the conversion of Constantine is emphasized especially by Eck 2007, 69–94, and Girardet 2009, 48 (with an additional reference to Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 1.5.3: the acceptance of Christianity in the Gallic prefecture). In fact, there is good reason to believe that the conspicuous presence of Gallic bishops or of Hosius of Cordoba at court was the result of connections cultivated by Constantine as ruler of the Gallic provinces from 306 to 312. These connections would be exploited intensively after 312, as Constantine became involved ever more intimately in Christian affairs. Interaction between the emperor of part of the empire and the Christian bishops of that part, which one can similarly prove for Licinius, need not have anything to do with Constantine's preferences in religio-political ideology. It is perhaps only Eusebius' episcopal wishful thinking that in his narrative bishops and clergy are at hand to explain Constantine's vision, which occurred while he was still in Gaul.

44

Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.26 (trans. Cameron/Hall 1999).

45

Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.27.2 (trans. Cameron/Hall 1999). This god “beyond the universe” who stands above all things also appears in the prayer of the soldiers who cling to paganism (Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 4.19). Girardet 2009, 209, argues that the king of heaven here is “als eine—im Gegensatz zum Gott Sol Invictus—nicht sichtbare, als eine nur in Gedanken erfaßbare Gottheit außerhalb der Welt, des Alls gedacht” and notes (following Batiffol 1929, 188–210) that the neoplatonic *summa divinitas* remains within the world. It is, though, common to all platonizing systems that the highest idea is located completely above the world at an inaccessible height. Even Mithras/Sol Invictus, who surely lurks behind the deity worshipped by Constantius Chlorus, does not stand for the visible sun god but rather for his identification with the ultimate sphere of the planets, which holds the universe together. The principle of the universal deity certainly permits a localization beyond the world.

46

Pan. lat. 12(9).2.4–5 (trans. Nixon/Rodgers 1994).

47

Praxag. 4: Constantine attacks Maxentius out of compassion with the Romans; see also Lib. *Or.* 59.19 and Them. *Or.* 3.44a. For an explanation of the similarity of these accounts, see Bleckmann 1999c, 216. In the narrative of Lactantius, by contrast, Maxentius is the aggressor (*Mort. pers.* 43.4), and the ideology of liberty plays a limited role; Maxentius, for example, is not depicted as an enemy of the Roman people (*Mort. pers.* 44.8).

48

Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.33–34.

49

Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 8.14.16–17; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 9.9.2: Constantine feels pity for

the inhabitants of Rome; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 9.9.4: God draws Maxentius out of the city as if by chains; Euseb. *Hist. eccl*. 9.9.5–8: biblical references and the equation of the liberation of Rome with the exodus. On the use of material from the Ecclesiastical History in the *Vita Constantini*, see Bleckmann 2007, 42; Van Dam 2011, 82–100.

51

Cf. already for 251 the famous numbers in the letter of the bishop Cornelius to Fabius of Antioch (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.43.11).

53

On the function of the new Christian adherents in the population of Rome, see Millar 1983, 83.

54

On the phenomenon of pagan monotheism, see Fürst 2006. The Tetrarchs' ostentatious return to polytheism should be understood as a deliberately conservative reorientation, although one also notices exaggerated emphasis of the chief god Jupiter.

55

The de facto addressee of such pro-Christian statements and clear support for the majority church in the Donatist controversy was not only the Church of Carthage. These actions will also have been brought to the attention of the great Church of Rome.

Roman Ideology, Cosmic Savior, and Christian

Addressees: The Medallion of Ticinum

Evidence of the ostentatious rapprochement of Constantine and the Christians in the context of celebration of the liberation of Rome and the new depiction of the emperor as a god-led and victorious savior is offered by the famous medallion of Ticinum (Figure 15.4). The obverse celebrates IMPERATOR CONSTANTINVS PIVS FELIX AVGVSTVS and his military victory as the guarantor of the SALVS REI PVBLICAE, and the *adlocutio* scene on the reverse illustrates in Trajanic fashion the good understanding between the emperor and his army.[56] The medallion shows the head of Constantine facing in three-quarter profile—an unusual depiction, though anticipated by issues of Maxentius. The face bears stylistic similarity to the portrait of the colossal statue in Rome; the frontal view with the large eyes looking upward illustrates the divine qualities of the emperor. This is made explicit not least by the parallel gold issues from Ticinum, which show Constantine in three-quarter profile with a nimbus.[57] Conspicuous on the medallion from Ticinum is the image of the Capitoline she-wolf on the shield, a symbol that Maxentius had revived. An issue of Maximian Herculius that showed the emperor with a she-wolf shield and horse head had provided the immediate model.[58] The she-wolf had alluded to *Roma aeterna* since Gallienus[59] and in the context of the Constantine portrait stands for the eternity of Constantine’s rule; the type thus has strong religious and political connotations.[60]

Silver medallion of emperor Constantine, RIC 7 Ticinum 36.

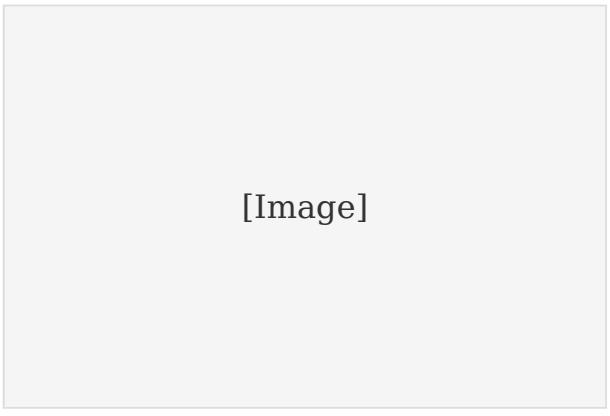


Figure 15.4

The juxtaposition of Rome ideology and a cosmic, eternal world peace is also illustrated by an extensive bronze issue bearing the legend BEATA

TRANQVILLITAS and released before the second war with Licinius (Figure 15.5). The *beata tranquillitas* types consistently depict a globe with cross-shaped structures that represents the universe. The abundance of details that the *beata tranquillitas* coins offer is no less indicative of worship of a cosmic, vaguely defined universal god.[61] Alongside the cosmic globe, Rome iconography is well represented in the numerous motifs on the shields and busts of Constantine and his sons.[62] Finally, the legend BEATA TRANQVILLITAS itself might indicate peace for Rome and its citizens and the general cosmic harmony that the triumphant emperor, the *fundator quietis*, had achieved with the help of the supreme god. The “merry peace” in the religious proclamations of Maximinus Daza are similar.[63]

Follis of Crispus, RIC 7 London 275.

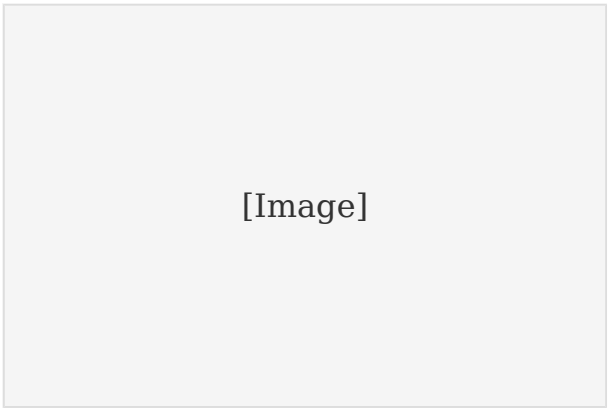


Figure 15.5

The juxtaposition of heavenly symbolism, exaltation of Constantine to an instrument of a divine plan for salvation, and Rome iconography, as is palpable in Eusebius’ account of the vision, appears not only on the medallion from Ticinum with its *aeternitas* symbolism[64] or on the *beata tranquillitas* issues, but also on the Arch of Constantine: its framing by the sun and moon has already been noted. The Christogram on Constantine’s helmet on the issue from Ticinum must also be explained in this context of cosmological Rome iconography. Presumably, this monogram was first invented under Constantine and was not universally known as a specifically Christian symbol. On the contrary, it was the variant theology propagated by the emperor, in which Christ was the guarantor of military victory, that elevated the monogram to the symbol of the supreme deity that won Constantine’s triumphs.[65] To pagan observers, the small star-shaped symbol in a wreath may have appeared to be merely another allusion to the cosmic dimensions

of the connection between Constantine and Rome.[66] Even non-Christian cosmological interpretations of the Chi are possible; the cosmological-soteriological ambivalence of the Chi-cross plays a significant role already in early Christian interpretations, especially in Justin.[67] In favor of such a rather astronomical-cosmological understanding, one might note Lactantius' description of a variant of the new symbol merely as *caeleste signum*, as a (cosmic) heavenly sign.[68] How the Christogram and the Capitoline she-wolf together were supposed to be interpreted was perhaps deliberately left open, or it first became intelligible in the context of other coin issues. The military context so conspicuous on the Ticinum medallion might lead one to conjecture that the coin with its combination of Rome imagery and Christianity was intended to appeal above all to the Christian soldiers, perhaps especially those who had come to Rome from Gaul and who, after the suppression of the praetorian guard and the *equites singulares*, continued to serve in the immediate vicinity of the emperor. However that may be, the juxtaposition of Rome symbolism and a partly Christian, partly cosmological sign fits exactly in a thematic context in which Rome ideology, cosmic exaltation of Constantine's role as savior, and cultivation of the great Christian community of Rome are inextricably linked.

Footnotes

56

On the medallion, see Kraft 1954–1955; Overbeck 2000; Bernardelli 2007. Overbeck 2000, 18, whom I follow here, interprets the legend as follows: "Der Kaiser Constantin ist also das Heil, das Wohlergehen des Staates." *Contra* Girardet 2007a, 42: "Und wenn die Rückseitenlegende des Medaillons die *salus rei publicae* verkündet, dann besagt dies zusammen mit dem Christogramm auf der Vorderseite, daß das 'Heil des Staates' durch die Hilfe des Christengottes gewonnen worden war"; cf. Girardet 2010, 82.

59

Cf. here Turcan 1983, 27, with reference to RIC 5.1 Gallienus 349, 628, 677.

60

Contra Overbeck 2000, 18, to whom the *lupa Romana* is “only” a shield emblem with an “historisch-politischen, nicht religiösen Aussagekraft.” In light of the significance of the shield for religious statements, palpable for instance in the report of Lactantius about the staurogram on the shields of Constantine’s army and also attested by the depiction of the quadriga of the sun god or of the Christogram, it seems unfounded to attribute religious significance to the Christogram on the helmet but not to the shield emblem.

61

In favor of this is the fact that the *caesar* Crispus appears with the attributes of a priest of the sun god; cf. Alten/Zschucke 2004, 17 and 22; Wienand 2012, 311–313. The sun god is subordinate to the universal *summus deus* as a helper or concrete manifestation in a way similar to the subordination of *caesar* Crispus to *augustus* Constantine. In contrast, the *beata tranquillitas* type is interpreted by Staats 2008, 345, as a manifestation of a new Christian religious order.

62

Cf., for example, Alten-Zschucke 2004, 88: In the depiction on the shield, Roma hands an orb to Constantine who crosses from the left.

63

Euseb. *Hist. eccl*. 9.7.11.

64

I refer to an unpublished talk given in Würzburg by Peter Weiß in 2006, in which he interprets the pattern on the helmet as a combination of cross and star symbolism.

66

Girardet 2010, 54–55, also presumes an initial ambiguity, at least for the precursor

of the Christogram postulated by him, the six-pointed star that could be read as an abbreviation of Iesous Christos (Chi and Iota). On the smallness of the symbol on the medallion, cf. Overbeck 2000, 18: “Kein überzeugter Heide konnte Anstoß nehmen.” On the staurogram and Christogram as initially non-Christian abbreviations, cf. Dinkler-von Schubert 1995, 33–34.

67

Chi as an all-pervasive sign was, according to Neo-platonist speculation inspired by Plato’s *Timaeus*, a symbol of the “power that stood next to the first God,” thus for a Christian interpretation of the Logos. For an interpretation of the Chi as a cosmological manifestation of the Christian truth of the cross, see Bousset 1913, 273; Dinkler 1967a, 38–39. For a summary of these cosmological interpretations of the cross, which appear especially in Justin, see Heid 2001. Chi as a cosmological symbol derives from the crossing of the ecliptic and the celestial equator.

68

Lact. *Mort. pers.* 44.5.

Conclusion: Constantine, Roman Christians, and the Conversion

After his triumph over Maxentius, Constantine placed his special relationship with the supreme god firmly in the foreground. That presumably explains the idiosyncrasy of his building policy in Rome, whereby Constantine omitted building new sacred structures in the inner city of Rome. In light of his new, exaggerated self-aggrandizement, Constantine had no objections to continuing a sacred structure of Maxentius dedicated to Rome and Venus or to permitting solar, lunar, and other imagery from the pagan pantheon to be depicted on his triumphal arch. He could erect larger structures at his own initiative only where they suited his exclusive patron god, the exalted *summus deus*, and were uncompromised by connection with the conventional pantheon. These reservations must have made the Christian churches on the urban periphery and outside the city seem like ideal projects: Constantine could display his munificence without having to tie himself to

old religious models.[69] Such large-scale projects had the additional advantage of winning large numbers of Christian adherents from the city population. Not even Eusebius, significantly, saw the Roman churches begun after victory over Maxentius as a complete revolution, a reorganization of Rome in building. He characterizes them in, for him, relatively restrained language as the extension and ornamentation of something already present: “Indeed he also supplied rich help from his own resources to the churches of God, enlarging and elevating the places of worship, while beautifying the grander ecclesiastical sacred buildings with many dedications.”[70]

The church-building program in Rome, at least for the first years after 312, can scarcely be interpreted as an expression of an exclusively Christian self-interpretation of Constantine’s mission or as evidence that Constantine resolved to propagate more emphatically his new dynastic-Christian ideology on the periphery so as to avoid the center that was beholden to the old traditions. The expansion of the Christian infrastructure at the expense of its imperial patron surely attests to close contact between church and emperor. This contact caused the conversion of Constantine to interconnect two initially independent processes. One was the realignment of Constantine, under way before the struggle against Maxentius and completed in 312, to a cosmic god as an alternative to the Tetrarchic religious policy; the other was the dynamic relationship that arose from Constantine’s encounter with the Christian Church of the West, above all the great churches of Rome and Carthage. As Constantine now assumed responsibility for this church, particularly evident in his involvement in the Donatist controversy, and thereby stressed the compatibility of Christian theology with his own conception of god, permanent contact with functionaries of this church led him to adopt their attitudes and values. Vice versa, the church accepted that the emperor would organize its affairs and reinterpret the Christian god, in that Constantine made him into a militarily effective *summus deus* who acted in the interest of Rome. In other words, the process of rapprochement after the year 312 brought it about that the emperor very rapidly became Christian, and Christianity very rapidly became imperial. Doubtless this process of rapprochement took place not only in Rome but also in other areas of the Roman empire, in different forms in each case. The encounter between the triumphant emperor and a liberated Rome, its Christian population, and the bishop of Rome contributed not insignificantly in this complex process, which characterizes the conversion of Constantine as a whole, to the acceleration of this rapprochement. Moreover, standing communications between the Church of Rome and the other western churches, on the one hand, and the great churches of the East on the other made Constantine appear from the start as

the better alternative in the struggle against Licinius to the Christian communities of the East. Constantine would meet these expectations after his victory in 324, among other things, in his great confessional circulars to the churches of the East or by his appearance at the Council of Nicaea.

Footnotes

69

This is particularly true of the Lateran Basilica, dedicated already before the second war against Licinius. It is now doubted by some whether St. Peter’s was even built under Constantine; see Bowersock 2005.

70

Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.42.2 (trans. Cameron/Hall 1999).

Acknowledgments

I thank Johannes Wienand for his critical reading and numerous suggestions for improvement and further thought.

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